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Reagan: Gadhafi Should 'Go to Bed ... Wondering What We Might Do'

Excerpts of a White House interview yesterday with President Reagan and a senior administration official, speaking on grounds that he not be identified, by newspaper columnists and broadcast commentators.

You're quoted today in The Washington Post as having said at a meeting on Aug. 14 that [Libyan leader Moammar] Gadhafi should go to San Francisco. One of the papers I write for is in San Francisco, and they take that as a bit of a slur and wonder, the implication being that nuts like Gadhafi should go to San Francisco because that's where a lot of nuts live. And I wondered if you wanted to say anything.

Reagan: I challenge the veracity of that entire story I read this morning with great shock, and sometimes, I understand your sacred policy of never revealing sources, but do you really have to defend sources that misinform you? . . .

There is a memo quoted [in The Post] that says that there is not evidence of Gadhafi's planning any operations, that he seems to be quiescent. Yet the press was told at the time that he apparently was planning new activities. Now was, did the White House disinform the press, or did it not in this instance?

Reagan: We've been keeping track, of course, as well as we can, with regard to intelligence information as to whether or not he has, he's planning additional moves or terrorist acts and so forth. And so, yes, there are memos back and forth about that and what the information is, and so when I challenge the veracity of that whole story, I can't deny that here and there, they're going to have something to hang it on.

What way do you challenge the veracity of it?

Reagan: I don't want Gadhafi anyplace in the United States, and being Californian, it's the last place I'd send him.

The main burden of the story suggests that your White House, specifically your national security adviser, constructed an operation whereby the free press in this country was going to be used to convey a false story to the world, namely that Gadhafi was planning new terrorist operations and that we were going to hit him again or we might hit him again—full well knowing that this was not true. Now, if that's the case, then the press is being used, and we will in the future not know when we're being told information from the White House whether it's true or not.

Reagan: Anytime you get any of those leaks, call me. I'll be happy to tell you which ones are honest or not. But no, our position—this was wrong and false—our position has been one of which, after we took the action we felt we had to take, and I still believe was the correct thing to do, our position has been one in which we would just as soon have Mr. Gadhafi go to bed every night wondering what we might do. And I think that's the best position for anyone like that to be in.

Certainly, we did not intend any program in which we were going to suggest or encourage him to do more things, or more terrorist—conduct more terrorist attacks. We would hope that the one thing that we have done will have turned him off on that for good . . .

You've left the impression, I think, that you think it is all right to put out false information to the press in order to make Gadhafi nervous.

Reagan: Oh, no. No.

Is that not accurate?

Reagan: Oh, no. No.

Was the information that was put out false, or was it accurate?

Reagan: I used this same term once when there used to be arguments and I wasn't in this office at the time—in another office. There used to be arguments about nuclear weapons in Vietnam during that conflict. And I said at the time that, while we knew that we were never going to use nuclear weapons there, we should never say that. We should just let them go to bed every night wondering whether we might use those weapons.

Well, the same thing is true with someone like Gadhafi and with all the speculation that was going on in the media throughout the world about whether our action would tempt him into further acts or not. And constantly there were questions—aimed at me as to were we planning anything else. My feeling was, I wouldn't answer those questions. My feeling was just the same thing—he should go to bed every night wondering what we might do.

But in this case, apparently there were memos which said there was a deliberate attempt to mislead the press and the American people.

Reagan: Those I challenge. They were not a part of any meeting I've ever attended.

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This [Washington Post staff writer Bob] Woodward story is based on an alleged memorandum from your national security adviser with lengthy quotes. Are those quotes accurate, and does this memorandum exist?

Reagan: Not things of that kind that was just—that you just asked about, no. This was not any plan of ours. But I've come to the conclusion that Mr. Woodward is probably "Deep Throat" . . .

Senior official: The problem with the story and the inaccuracy of the story the president was talking about is the allegation and the implication that somehow the U.S. government had initiated or that the president had authorized a program of disinformation for the American media. That implication in the story is absolutely false.

You must distinguish between the audiences, you must distinguish between deception and disinformation. With the president's point about Gadhafi going to bed at night; the point is that the president—and he has said that numerous times before—feels that Col. Gadhafi should have some doubt as to what we are doing or might do. But in no way, in carrying out that general policy of the president's, has the White House or anybody suggested or done anything to provide disinformation to the American media.

Did you write the memo?

Senior official: We have got an analysis going on comparing memos that we have with the story to find out exactly what memo it is. So I don't know the answer to your question.

Will you make any effort to find who leaked it to Woodward?

Senior official: Absolutely. You bet.

Are the quotes in the memo and the paraphrasing of the memo, are they inaccurate?

Senior official: I can't verify that, because I haven't set down myself and compared the story with memos that may or may not exist. But, as you read the story, the thing that comes through to me, and I think comes through to all of you, is

that we were somehow engaged in a disinformation campaign in the United States, and that simply is not the case. And that is unequivocal.

You clearly had in mind some sort of a disinformation campaign in the world, and that—and the fruits of that campaign were leaked, first to The Wall Street Journal, then to other publications. You read the newspapers. The White House staff said, yes, that is basically accurate, and allowed the falsehoods to be perpetuated.

Senior official: We will stand by the statements that were made in Santa Barbara about The Wall Street Journal article. The article in The Wall Street Journal was not authorized. We are still looking for the leaker of that story.

The point is—and we need to go back and check the record to see, precisely what we said at the time—but we were not trying to hype that story. The hype that occurred to the story was, in my opinion, primarily the result of the August syndrome in Santa Barbara, where there is not enough to write about. And I think I am on background with the news magazines that I briefed on the Friday in Los Angeles where I made that very same point.

The Wall Street Journal story is generally accurate, and I think the statement in Santa Barbara—that it was basically authoritative. I would describe it a little bit differently. I would say it was basically accurate.

There was nothing put—whoever leaked the story to The Wall Street Journal was not providing disinformation.

Now let me clear up one point, though, and that is that, as I think some of you at least understand, the intelligence community in the United States is quite large. You've got a lot of different intelligence analysts. They often disagree on the interpretation of information. And so unfortunately they tend to—they sometimes, if they disagree with policy, will surface those disagreements. But the information in the story in The Wall Street Journal as to what Gadhafi was doing is reasonably accurate.

Is Woodward's story also generally or reasonably or basically accurate?

Senior official: I don't want to confirm that because we really don't want to confirm intelligence operations or exactly what we are doing in this case.

I don't—could you—it sounds to me as if you are disputing one element of the story, which is that this administration knew Libya was not behind recent terrorist events.

Senior official: Yes. That simply is not the case. In August what we knew—we saw lots of cases. For a long period of time after the April 14 raid on Tripoli—in fact, it was for about, let's see, May, June, July—for about three months there was very little activity that we could associate with Libya involving terrorism.

But, about the middle of July, we began to see moves by Gadhafi and his government to reestablish their terrorist networks, which had been badly damaged by the actions that mainly the Europeans took in pulling down their People's Bureau in the various countries. But about the middle of July we began to detect intelligence that—it didn't say that he was going to go off and bomb something or go off and take somebody hostage or hijack an airplane. It wasn't that kind of hard intelligence, but there were little pieces that indicated he was beginning to move.